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business etiquette survival guide navigating sticky situations at work

Workplace dilemmas crop up in every professional's career, whether you have two or 20 years of experience on the job. But most people don't think about these situations until they arise, resulting in hasty decisions they sometimes regret. While there's no sense adopting a worrywart's mentality, familiarizing yourself with common career predicaments can help you handle them diplomatically if - and when - they occur.

To help you prepare for these sticky situations, we tapped four industry experts - and past contributors to the eZine - for their recommended strategies. Following are seven work-related quandaries and ideas to help you manage them with finesse:

Sticky Situation: You're in the third month of a new job and your professional relationship with the boss is uncomfortable. How can you break the ice?

- *Do some detective work.* National speaker and marketing mentor [Ilise Benun](#) says a bit of curiosity can help you get to know your boss better. "Asking appropriate questions - about a photograph or certificate you see in your boss's office, for example - can segue into an interesting conversation," she says. "Even offhand comments can be fodder for a dialogue with a new acquaintance. Just be sure to listen closely to what is said and ask plenty of follow-up questions."
- *Head for neutral territory.* [Glenn John Amowitz](#), Wyeth Corporate Graphic's assistant director, recommends socializing outside the office. "Invite your boss to lunch and try to find some similarities, such as a hobby or vacation destination, that will help you develop the relationship," he says. "You don't have to be best friends, but if you can connect with your boss on another level, you'll find that your professional relationship may benefit."

Sticky Situation: The "office talker" just stepped into your workspace, and you know you'll be trapped for the next 20 minutes. You have several pressing projects to attend to and no time to chat. What do you do?

- *Make a move.* "Use both body and verbal language to communicate that you are not available to talk," explains Benun. For example, stand up and move toward the door, as if you are ushering the intruder out, and clearly state your situation.
- *Tell it like it is.* In this situation, a straightforward comment can be most effective. [Jeff Fisher](#), the Engineer of Creative Identity for Jeff Fisher LogoMotives, reveals his exit strategy: "I'd do the same thing I do when my neighbor attempts to trap me in a conversation in my driveway: I simply say, 'Excuse me, I'm really busy right now and don't have time to give a conversation with you the time it deserves.' This gives me the opportunity to escape without being rude."

Sticky Situation: The person sitting next to you at work plays music constantly via streaming audio because he says it helps him concentrate. But it's very distracting to you, and his taste doesn't match yours. What should you do?

- *Clue him in.* Your neighbor may be so wrapped up in his work - and the soulful tunes coming from his computer - that he may be completely clueless as to how his actions are affecting you. Benun says the first step to resolving the situation is letting the person know how you feel, and then simply stating your needs. "Maybe even offer a compromise, such as certain times when he can play the music so that it would be less distracting to you," she says.

- *Extol the virtue of headphones.* "There's certainly nothing wrong with suggesting the individual wear headphones or earbuds, especially in these iPod days," says Fisher. "If that doesn't work, get some headphones yourself; the coworker may get the message. Tattling to a supervisor should be a last resort - but sometimes it is necessary."

Sticky Situation: You've e-mailed an executive twice asking for approval on a project, and you have yet to hear back. Your deadline is in danger of not being met. Is there a polite way to follow up?

- *Don't restrict yourself to e-mail.* When deadlines are looming, **David Langton**, graphic design principal and partner at Langton Cherubino Group, recommends reaching the person by phone. "I encourage our staff members to use phone calls when an immediate response is required. E-mail is a passive mode of communication; you never know when or if the other party will respond to your request, and, frequently, they may misunderstand your point or tone."
- *Follow a formula.* Even well-intentioned managers can get caught in the avalanche of meetings, phone calls, e-mail and instant messages and lose track of critical, time-sensitive issues. Benun offers a five-step process for resolving the situation:
 1. Devise a strategy based on what you know about your boss's or client's communication preferences and habits.
 2. Approach with curiosity; ask if the person is aware of the issue.
 3. If so, ask if it's a priority to him or her.
 4. If it is a priority, ask what the obstacle is. You may not be aware of details in the process that may be getting in the way, such as someone else who needs to give approval but also isn't responding.
 5. Finally, ask what you can do to help move the process forward. Can you provide additional information? Do some homework? Make a call or two? Somehow eliminate the obstacle?

Sticky Situation: Your supervisor tells you that the projects you just completed needs to be revamped because of numerous "errors." You are certain that it complies with the client's original requests. How do you handle the criticism?

- *Start off on the right foot.* According to Arnowitz, developing a design brief for every assignment you take on can help you avoid this predicament all together. "It ensures both parties understand the project's scope and are in agreement with the objectives. It also serves as an essential point of reference and helps keep the project on track," he explains.
- *Seek clarification.* "Ask for specifics about the errors so that you can compare it to whatever information you may have about the original request," advises Benun. "Don't take any negative feedback personally. Simply question and compare the facts, and get more if you need them."
- *Shift your focus to solutions.* When Langton receives bad news from clients, he first asks them to be specific about their issues and makes an effort to listen to their comments without interrupting. "I acknowledge their feedback and then find a way to shift the focus to solutions," he says. "Sometimes this involves asking the client - or your supervisor - how he or she would like the error to be fixed. The most important thing is to establish accountability - a willingness to fix the errors and an open conversation. It's in the errors that we have the opportunities to enrich our relationships with clients and coworkers."

Sticky Situation: You work on a creative team of four professionals, one of whom continually takes credit for your work. How do you ensure your supervisor knows you're pulling your weight without creating tension among the team?

- *Track your achievements.* Arnowitz suggests documenting your work and asking team members to do the same. "When the project is complete, prepare a report that details the contributions of each team member and submit it to your supervisor," he says.
- *Keep in touch with your supervisor.* Providing weekly updates to your manager about the

aspects of the project you've completed and are currently working on will ensure he or she is aware of your accomplishments and workload. Benun also recommends asking for regular feedback or clarification so that your boss has an accurate picture of your progress and areas for improvement.

- *Confront your colleague.* Pussyfooting around the person won't resolve the issue, explains Fisher. "You can take direct control of the situation by approaching the individual. Tell the person that you appreciate his or her contributions to help the group meet its goals, but it's unfair to accept credit for the contributions of others. Then politely ask him to stop doing it," he says. "Any perceived tension or animosity will hopefully evaporate over time."

Sticky Situation: You haven't received a raise in the past two years despite taking on greater responsibilities. It's been over a year since your last performance review - the time you normally discuss your salary - and there's no indication that your manager plans to schedule one any time soon. How do you approach the subject?

- *Assert yourself.* "Be proactive," says Arnowitz. "Take the initiative to schedule a meeting with your supervisor to specifically review your job responsibilities, short- and long-term goals, and your salary. Outline additional responsibilities you've taken on and provide details on how your efforts have made significant contributions to specific projects. If your supervisor doesn't agree with your assessment, ask for more feedback and explain that you would benefit from consistent and more frequent performance reviews. You'll earn more respect from your supervisor than if you whine and complain."
- *Realize when it's time to move on.* If your requests for a review are continually denied or ignored, it may be time to look for a new job, explains Fisher. "No employee should tolerate working in a situation where their efforts aren't recognized or rewarded," he says.

For more tips on handling tricky workplace situations and avoiding business-etiquette blunders, check out The Creative Group's *A to Z Business Etiquette Guide*. To request your free copy of the guide, contact The Creative Group [office nearest you](#) or call 1.888.846.1668.

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